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POLITICAL TRENDS AND DAWN OF JUSTICE PARTY

C.VELUCHAMY

Associate Professor
Department of History PMT College Melaneelithanallor Sankarankovil Taluk
Tirunelveli District.

Abstract:

The Paper is an attempt to highlight the circumstances which favoured the Non-Brahmin Movement otherwise called Dravidian Movement which had its birth in the form of the Justice Party. Many political events were connected with the genesis of the Justice Party which is considered the Mother of all the Dravidian Parties which dominated the Independent Tamil Nadu Political Scenario. The domination of the Brahmins, the role played by the Egmore-Mylapore groups and the Vembakkam Iyengar Family in all public and political services in the late half of the Nineteenth Century and in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, the cultural renaissance ignited by Annie Besant all inculcated a spirit of adventurism in the mind of the elite non-Brahmin leaders who took steps to organize a political forum for the cause of Non-Brahmins. Hence the formation of the Justice Party.

KEYWORDS:

Dravidian, Non-Brahmin, Renaissance, Egmore-Mylapore-clique

INTRODUCTION:

Politics in Madras Presidency in the first quarter of Twentieth Century contained factions formed vertically through client nexuses and were motivated by narrow economic and short-term power - interests.¹ However, these factional theories did not stand to any careful scrutiny.² Further the cleavages between Brahmin and non-Brahmin gradually developed to the early decades of Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu.³ In this regard Saroja Sundarajan viewed thus: "This anti-Brahmin feeling was a totally new phenomenon, the like of which had not been witnessed in the earlier epochs in the Presidency. She adds further that 'until this movement was ushered in, all the castes of the society lived in amity". This type of propaganda devoid of facts was carried out.⁴

BRAHMIN - NON-BRAHMIN SPLITS

There are innumerable evidences in the early Tamil literature which show that these splits are not a new phenomenon. It was the articulation of preexisting social rivalry.⁵ The scholarly work by Eugene F. Irschick also considers that 'when the Justice Party was formed in late 1916, anti-Brahmin sentiment was not a new phenomenon in Madras. In the 1880's and to an even greater extent in the 1890s, non-Brahmins in many different capacities voiced their concern about the growing number of Brahmins in public services, in the Indian National Congress, and on the District Boards, and about Brahmins in general as the dominant group in the religious and social life of South India'. But the rivalry had to be traced back even further. For

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instance, Sundaram Pillai's theory brought out posthumously by his friend Ponnambalam Pillai⁶ establishes that Ramayana was written in order to proclaim the prowess of the Aryans and to represent their rivals and enemies, the Dravidians, who had attained a high degree of civilisation at that period, in the worst possible colour'. The rakshas as, according to Ponnambalam Pillai, though identified with the Dravidians⁷, had never in fact existed but had been created by the Aryans so that 'the Dravidians might look small in the eyes of posterity'. Thus, the Tamils and Brahmins are different racially and culturally. The rivalry was there right from the period of Ramayana. Evidences are available in the works of Caldwell to Pavanar to substantiate the theory of Dravidian - Aryan Race. Though the Tamil Brahmins have ridiculed this theory as 'myth' 'fiction' and the like, the Tamils have convinced among themselves about this theory through their own ethnographic conditions. This is also one of the main reasons for the success of the Dravidian Movement.

Another study establishes the fact of " Brahmin - Non-Brahmin antagonism", developed many years ago.⁸ It viewed that 'It is easy to see that anti-brahminism did not begin with the Justice Party. There were age old grievances against the Brahmins voiced by different cross sections of the Tamil public; but mostly, due to the support and patronage of royalty, they got on without getting into too much, trouble with the rest of the society. The immediate provocation as in the late 19th Century . The Tamil intellectuals like Ramalingam Pillay, Sundaram Pillay and Vedachalam preached the philosophy of social egalitarianism.⁹ The provocation at the beginning of the Twentieth Century was the continuing domination of the Brahmin community in Government, both at the administrative and executive levels and their hold on the professions.

There are other specific reasons and conditions through which these splits shifted from society to polity and articulated formally through the new institutions of polity which were emerging during the early decades of Twentieth Century.

MULTIFACTED FACTORS

The first significant development during this period which is the central theme to the discourse on Brahmin - non-Brahmin is the direct bearing of social structure on economic conditions. The non-Brahmin was pitted against the Brahmin not to achieve supremacy in the social hierarchy but to compete for their economic survival. Thus the economic root of the social splits gradually surfaced during this period and created a condition for non-Brahmin to protest against the domination of Brahmin in an organised manner through the Justice Party.

DOMINATION OF BRAHMINS IN EDUCATION AND SERVICES

The hegemony of Brahmins in public services played a significant role in the dawn of the Justice Party. There are number of studies that confirm this total dominance of Brahmins in public service.¹⁰ The Brahmins made it possible by acquiring the western English education introduced by the Colonial Authority. This they found easy with their traditional monopoly and supremacy over educational affairs. In the case of non-Brahmins, the available evidence shows that the first 'Pariah' boy who dare enough to apply for school education, created unprecedented controversy in Madras Presidency during the early decades of the Nineteenth Century.¹¹ However, it was not a surprise that the 'Pariah' boy was denied admission after having debated the 'offence' in detail. Similar incident happened in a school at Dharwar in Bombay Presidency during 1856 and ended with the same result met by the 'pariah' boy in Madras. The application for formal education of the Paraiah boy met with such strong opposition, in spite of the genuine efforts of the broad minded British administrators to Paraiah boys.¹²

ASCENDANCY IN POLITY

The dominance of Brahmins over the local level politics was complete. When the political integration of South India took place under the British initiatives of the State machinery got penetrated into the localities, the Brahmins found that they can influence and control the whole Presidency right from St. George Fort and started migrating gradually to the Madras City.¹³ The legislature and its various departments, Corporation of Madras, Municipalities, District Boards, University of Madras, Port Trust, Pachaiyappa's Trust, High court, various temple trusts and mutts and at last the Indian National Congress and Home Rule league were found to be the major power and patronage centres in the city of Madras through which one can build his power structure over the entire Presidency. This was what accurately the Brahmins have did to the extent of threatening the position of not only non-Brahmins but even the colonial administrators.

The influence of Brahmins on the electorate was indeed decisive. As priests, schoolmasters, Government servants and journalists, the Brahmins had acquired great influence and this influence coupled with their traditional authority in socio-religious matters actually gave them a high status and unchallenged leadership in public affairs.¹⁴ This particular factor, of political dominance by Brahmins created negative effect in the form of the rise of the non-Brahmin movement. The domination of the Brahmins began to decline along with emergence of the non-Brahmin Movement.¹⁵

FACTIONS, SECTS AND FAMILIES

The domination of the Brahmins was consolidated and strengthened by way of forming different factions and family sects like Mylapore group, Vambakkam Iyengar family and Egmore group. The peculiar, almost conspiratorial nature of political life in Madras city, led to the formation of specialised political groupings designed to extract and distribute patronage.¹⁶ Vembakkam family members had been prominent in the madras City since the early 1800s and among their number were several lawyers and two dewans. The family produced a series of legal luminaries, including V. Bashyam Aiyangar (1844-1908), the leading lawyer of his day, who became Madras High Court Judge.¹⁷ This patronage system had also contributed much for the formation of Justice Party. Though some of the members of Justice Party were earlier members of one of these groups called 'Egmore Clique', it was inevitable at that time because it was their rudimentary response to the Brahmin domination over the emerging new institutions of polity.

Between 1910 and 1920, Mylapore Group reached its power of domination.¹⁸ It could throw men out of the institutions of local self Government.¹⁹ The Mylapore coterie became a colossal and it would either make or mar men and matters.²⁰ Apart from this clique, similar patronage system was also built by single family like Vambakkam Iyengar family. With a history running back to 1820s, the influence of this family came to be felt throughout the Province, when the higher posts of the Government of Fort St. George were thrown open to Indians.²¹ These cliques and families caused rampant corruption of Government which is 'unconcealed and open' in matters of public appointments and nominations. Thus the elected, nominated and appointed places of almost all the State machinery became a matter of family arrangements among the Brahmins.²²

CONGRESS

The Indian National Congress in Madras Presidency region was another political institution. This institution in Madras was an ideological commitment to Indian nationalism among the Madras Congressmen. However, this platform had been served as another source of power and patronage mainly for Brahmins. Many non-Brahmin caste-Hindus as well as Depressed Classes harshly criticised the Indian National Congress for being only the representative of Brahmin interests.²³

TAMIL REVIVALISM

The religious and cultural revivalism of the Tamils was another important factor for the emergence of Brahmin and non-Brahmin polarisation. This revivalism unearthed the greatness of Tamil language and the unique and greatness of its literature was rediscovered.²⁴ The work of Caldwell, (1819-1891), being the first of its nature, was the beginning of this Tamil renaissance and was followed by the works of G. U. Pope, Arumuga Navalar, Thomodharan Pillai, U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, P. Sundaram Pillai, Kanakasabai Pillai, C. Subramaniya Bharathi and Maraimalai Adigal.²⁵ This renaissance, had brought out the golden Age of Tamil Past, its originality and helped the development of Tamil language through collection and edition of Tamil classics, translations, Journalism, etc. All these activities of Tamil renaissance not only strengthened the Dravidian Cultural Self-confidence but also reinforced the doctrine of dual culture- Aryan and Dravidian.²⁶ This renaissance paved the way not only for the emergence of the non-Brahmin movement during the early decades of this century but also helped to strengthen the movement in latter decades also.

EDUCATION OF NON-BRAHMINS

The growth of literacy among the non-Brahmin youth during this period was another important reason. The steep rise in literacy between 1901 and 1921 suggested a central reason for the entrance of non-Brahmins into Madras politics. During this period the non-Brahmins paid attention to their education which they saw the only panacea for their backwardness and worked towards raising that their literacy rate. The educational advancement of the non-Brahmins helped them to resent the almost exclusive control of

Government jobs and political life by Brahmins.²⁷ Thus the 'educational advance' and a 'consciousness of this advance' among the non-Brahmins led to the political trend of the growth of non-Brahmin political awakening.

PRESS ACTIVITIES

The widespread antagonism of non-Brahmin towards Brahmins started reflecting, with the help of growing literacy, in the columns of various newspapers like Madras Mail, Madras Standard, Indian Patriot, Common Weal, New India West Coast Spectator, etc. Pamphlets were also started championing the cause of non-Brahmins. notable 'pseudonym' in this connection is 'Fairplay' who had written two remarkable pamphlets namely 'The non Brahmin Races and the Indian Public Services' and 'The Ways and Means for the Amelioration of the non-Brahmin Races'. The first one declared that 'though the British were called the rulers of India, in reality the Brahman rules it'.²⁸ The columns of newspapers and pamphlets which sympathized the cause of the non Brahmins repeatedly emphasised the immediate necessity of consolidating non-Brahmins' through formal political institutions to emancipate the non-Brahmins themselves from their present position. Though all these are the reflections of the Brahmin-non-Brahmin cleavages, it had helped for a favourable situation for the formation of Justice Party.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND HOME RULE

The period between 1916-1920 witnessed with two important developments. One was the promise of a constitution making and the other was the Home Rule movement of Annie Besant. The beginning of these two events was the assurance given by the British authorities to provide further reform towards responsible and representative self Government after the war, provided that the Indians should help, the British in their war efforts against Germany. When Montagu made this announcement in Parliament on August 20, 1917, Madras political interests were in many respects already mobilised.²⁹ The Home rule movement became very active even in 1915 itself.³⁰

The Mayo's devolution order of 1870 first prepared the way for constitutional reform in the Madras Province.³¹ Centralisation of the administration and bringing the entire province under the colonial control were the two main aims of the reform.³² Further reform process upto Montagu announcement did contribute significantly for the benefit of Brahmins. It was this that allowed Mylapore to become so powerful, as most demand for a voice in matters of provincial administration had had to be channelled through Mylapore.³³

At this juncture, the Montagu's announcement intensified political activities in Madras Presidency because it posed the possibility of the transfer of power.³⁴ The political organisations submitted their proposed reform schemes. The Congress and Muslim League arrived at a joint scheme of reform proposal known as Congress-League Scheme. Some nineteen elected non-official members of the Imperial Legislative Council of India proposed their scheme, consisting of thirteen recommendations and this was named as 'Nineteen Memorandum'. Annie Besant also intensified her agitation for Home Rule. The Justice Party was born in this political climate to express the views of the non-Brahmin castes in Madras about the constitutional reforms.³⁵ The catalyst which triggered the formation of a non-Brahmin Political organisation was the foundation of the Home Rule Movement by Annie Besant. Already the non-Brahmins looked with suspicion at Congress as a Brahmin controlled organisation. Their suspicion grew stronger when Annie Besant joined the Congress and began her work for Home Rule.³⁶

There was another reason for the fear of non-Brahmins that Annie Besant also believed in and justified Hinduism and its fourfold caste system.³⁷ To quote the words of C.P. Ramaswamy Ayer, "It must not be forgotten that Annie Besant was the Prime factor in influencing men and women of other lands in favour of Hindu thought and culture at a time when India's own sons and daughters were becoming strangers to their own religion and culture and were beginning to think that ancestors had been barbarians and she also compiled small booklets containing tales of Aryan Greatness".³⁸ These clear-cut factual statements proved that Annie Besant was in no way different from the intention and activities of the Brahmins.

DAWN OF JUSTICE PARTY

The non-Brahmins began to realize that the time had come to press their claim to safeguard their interests under the new Constitutional system. They felt that the success of the Home Rule Movement in the event of Reforms would result in the entrenchment of Brahmins in the administration of the country.³⁹

Though there were some differences among themselves, they felt that this was the time to overcome those differences and unite than ever before. They also became conscious of the fact that if they failed to organise themselves and place before the British public the realities of the political situation in South India, their case would go by default.⁴⁰

Under these conditions, the South Indian Liberal Federation was formally inaugurated through the efforts of T.M. Nair and P. Theyagarajar with the objective of advancing, safeguarding and protecting the interests of the non-Brahmin community. A Joint Stock Company was also started under the name of South India's People's Association for conducting newspapers namely, Justice,⁴¹ an English daily, Dravidian a Tamil daily and Andhra Prakasika, a Telugu daily.⁴² The South India's People's Association also issued the famous 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' in December 1916, which witnessed swift changes in the Presidency. This year became a turning point in the history of Madras Politics Madras Politics. From the year onwards hectic political activities began in Madras politics.⁴³ 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' was called the 'Magna Carta of the Non-Brahmins'. The detailed account of the organisation and objectives of the movement are found in various studies, the paper confined its area of the study only about the political events and historical necessities which provided circumstances for the dawn of the Justice Party in the erstwhile Madras Presidency.

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- 3.In the pre-modern period, this rivalry was not confined to Tamil Nadu, alone but it was a panIndian phenomenon particularly during the periods of dominance of Buddhism. In Buddha's words 'Between ashes and gold there is a marked difference, but between a Brahmana and a Chandala' there is nothing of the kind. A Brahmana is not produced like fire by the friction of dry wood; he doesn't descend from the sky not from the air, nor does he come out piercing the earth. The Brahmana is brought forth from the womb of a woman in exactly the same way as a chandala' (Lakshmi Narasu, P., *A Study of Caste*, reprint, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1988)
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